

TOWN OF ARLINGTON
MASSACHUSETTS

REPORT OF THE
ELECTION MODERNIZATION COMMITTEE



TO THE
ANNUAL TOWN MEETING
APRIL 2022

This is the final report of the Election Modernization Committee (EMC). The EMC was originally created by a vote of Town Meeting in April 2019 with a lifetime of one year, but a vote of Special Town Meeting in November 2020 extended the lifetime of the committee until April 2022. We thank Town Meeting Members for allowing us to enjoy a very productive three years.

The sections that follow cover the contributions of the EMC since the 2021 Annual Town Meeting. They each summarize a different area of focus for the EMC over the past year: (1) Home Rule Petition Advocacy, (2) Voting Machine Accessibility, (3) Reprecincting Outreach, (4) Polling Location Study, (5) Understanding Election Costs, and (6) Youth Voter Engagement. To see our work from prior years, please see our report to the November 2020 Town Meeting¹, and the materials we prepared on Ranked Choice Voting for the April 2021 Town Meeting².

Ranked Choice Voting and Town Meeting Election Consolidation

The Election Modernization Committee presented Town Meeting with two Home Rule Legislation warrant articles, one in November 2020 to consolidate the election of Town Meeting Members when filling vacancies, and one in April 2021 to use Ranked Choice Voting for Town elections. We thank Town Meeting for approving both overwhelmingly.

Importantly, our work to enact these reforms didn't end with the Town Meeting vote. Home Rule petitions need the approval of the state legislature to become law. To help see these changes through, the EMC stayed in contact with our state delegation (State Representatives Garballey and Rogers and State Senator Friedman), and we spoke at hearings of the state's Joint Committee on Election Laws. With our advocacy, the home rule legislation to reform Town Meeting Member elections was approved and saw its first use at the April 2nd Town Election. We have received assurances that the Ranked Choice Voting legislation will soon be approved as well.

Voting Machine Accessibility

The Election Modernization Committee was presented with concerns regarding independent voting options for blind or low-vision Arlington residents. Since 2008, the town has utilized AutoMark ballot-marking devices, which allow blind and low-vision voters to hear a ballot read aloud, and mark their ballot using tactile buttons that provide private speech output. All Massachusetts cities and towns are required to provide one AutoMARK device per precinct, but they have increasingly fallen into disrepair and are plagued with technical problems that have prevented many citizens from voting independently.

In September, the EMC sent a letter to the Secretary of State, detailing the problems with the AutoMark devices and asking that he please authorize new accessible voting machine options for

¹ Report of the Election Modernization Committee to the Special Town Meeting, November 2020.

<https://www.arlingtonma.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/53567/637411198239030000>

² Article 24 - Ranked Choice Voting, Arlington Town Meeting, April 2021. <https://www.arlingtonrankedchoice.org>

purchase by cities and towns. Thus far, no response has been received. We also reached out to disability commissions and leaders around the state to learn that these problems are widespread. As one of the final actions of our committee, we will be asking the Select Board to follow-up with the Secretary of State's office in an open letter, to also be submitted for publication.

In addition, the Town Clerk, in consultation with the EMC, entered a contract to provide a new independent voting option, through the *Democracy Live* website. This system was successfully tested in Boston and other municipalities during the November 2021 election cycle. However, to realize the benefits of this web-based solution, we will have to wait for the state legislature to approve accessible vote by mail (AVBM).

The Committee believes that both efforts mentioned here are critical to maintaining independent and effective voting options for town voters who have visual impairments.

Reprecincting Outreach

As a result of the 2020 U.S. Census, the Town was required to redraw some of its precincts. The Election Modernization Committee closely observed the process, as the outcome would directly impact voting. The reprecincting process sought to divide the total number of Arlington residents into geographically contiguous groupings, each of not more than 4000 people, in a way that would not undermine minority voting rights. To develop a new precinct map, the Town created a Reprecincting Working Group, equipped with demographic mapping tools and tasked with the purpose of proposing new precinct boundaries in a short time frame.

With this in mind, the Election Modernization Committee determined that our role should focus on public outreach and engagement with the reprecincting process. To that end, we organized and co-hosted a public forum on reprecincting with the League of Women Voters of Arlington. The EMC and LWV engaged in extensive advertising about the event. The advertising included media articles, website postings, and emails, and we also posted paper flyers around town, including at the Arlington Farmers Market and Beer Garden. The goals of the forum were (1) to educate the public about the process and evolving reprecincting proposals, and (2) to collect public input to define communities of interest plus concerns and preferences about particular proposals.

In September 2021 many Arlington residents attended our well-advertised forum or viewed the recording produced by ACMI that was posted on the Town's website. After thorough presentations with maps and videos by the forum moderator, Town Clerk, and Senior Planner, the audience had the opportunity to ask clarifying questions. Attendees then divided into facilitated breakout groups for discussion. The forum led to a large number of comments delivered to Town Hall. This public feedback helped shape the Select Board's decision to keep the current number of 21 precincts with all 252 Town Meeting Members and to reset precinct lines according to the growing population while minimizing the number of precincts impacted.

Polling Location Study

When the new precincts were finalized, the Election Modernization Committee decided to weigh in on where new voting locations should be within those precincts. In 2019, the EMC had partnered with Envision Arlington to add voting-related questions to their town-wide survey, including questions about the convenience and accessibility of polling locations, and we sought to incorporate that data, in addition to other feedback we'd received over the years about polling locations, into our analysis.

We created a subcommittee to study the new precinct maps, the current and potential polling locations throughout town, and the Envision Arlington data we collected, and to make recommendations to the Select Board. These recommendations were then presented to and refined by the full committee. These recommendations centered around a few key ideas:

1. The Gibbs School ought to be reopened as a polling location for Precinct 7 and at least one other precinct. We had heard strong interest in voting at Gibbs from Precinct 7 residents, and it had previously been a polling location a number of years ago.
2. With Chestnut Manor closed as a polling location, Precinct 9 should be able to vote closer to home than the Bishop School. Two options are Town Hall or perhaps the High School, if it has reached a point in its construction where that is feasible.
3. Precinct 17 should have a more convenient polling location than the Peirce School, preferably a location on Mass Ave that is accessible by bus. Like Precinct 9, two options for Precinct 17 are Town Hall or the High School (again, subject to feasibility).
4. As indicated by the prior two points, the Town should consider making the High School a polling location once that the state of construction makes that feasible. As opening both the High School and Gibbs could strain election administration, if both are opened the Bishop School probably should be closed, due both to the close proximity of the High School to Bishop and the new shape of Precinct 11 that extends further from Bishop.

The EMC was happy to see the Select Board adopt the recommendation of opening Gibbs and of providing a better polling location for Precinct 9 (Town Hall). Unfortunately, Precinct 17 for the time will still have to vote at the Peirce School, but perhaps that could change in the future if the High School can be opened as a polling location as the construction winds down.

Early Voting for Town Elections

Since our first meeting in 2019, the Election Modernization Committee has been very interested in making early voting available in town elections, as it has been for state general elections since

2016. However, when we learned that Cambridge had attempted to make early voting available for city elections in 2018 via the home rule process, only to be rebuffed by the state Election Laws Committee, we turned our focus to reforms that would stand a stronger chance of success.

Today, four years after Cambridge's attempt, the ground seems to have shifted in our favor. There is strong interest in the state legislature in making some of the flexible COVID-era voting provisions permanent. Current drafts of the VOTES Act under consideration by the legislature would enable cities and towns to opt into early voting. For these reasons, the EMC believes a home rule petition in 2022 may be successful where one in 2018 was not. Lastly, even if the petition is not successful, the effort will stand as a statement of the town's strong support for expanded early voting.

Even though the state may give us an early voting option via the VOTES Act, the EMC thinks it's still important to move forward with a home rule petition anyway. First, passage of the VOTES Act is not guaranteed, let alone the early voting provision within its current drafts. Furthermore, the VOTES Act would only create an option for early voting that would have to be renewed annually by the Select Board, whereas our proposed home rule legislation would make it a mandated permanent fixture of Town Elections.

Understanding Election Costs

The Election Modernization Committee was interested in getting a better handle on the true cost of elections. The interest was not driven by a feeling that they were too expensive nor by a specific plan to lower costs, but by a desire to better understand all the components that go into running an election and to better answer cost-related questions that arise.

Two lessons became readily apparent from this exercise. The first lesson is that election costs are very hard to pin down precisely, because the components are spread across several different budgets, including Select Board, Clerk's office, Police, and DPW, and not all of those budgets itemize their election-related costs separately from other expenses. As a result, our numbers were very rough and high-level. The second lesson is that even with some pessimistic assumptions elections are relatively cheap, costing somewhere between \$1 and \$2 per resident.

Youth Voter Engagement

To address the lack of participation of young people in Town elections, the EMC formed a subcommittee, one member of which was a current Arlington High School student, to study the possibilities for engaging high school students in Town elections generally. Voting at a young age is linked to long-term voting habits, so successful engagement with this demographic would be a significant victory.

One topic of study by the subcommittee was the prospect for lowering the voting age to 16 for Town elections. The members of the sub-committee researched the potential benefits and downsides of allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in local elections and the outcomes of municipalities that have tried. The subcommittee concluded that lowering the voting age would be a net benefit to democratic participation in Arlington and summarized their findings in a one-page “Vote16 Arlington” fact sheet.

The EMC determined that if there was going to be an effort to lower the voting age in Arlington, it should co-lead it with Arlington high-schoolers seeking that change. The high-school member of the subcommittee shared the fact sheet with various clubs and youth groups about their interest in pursuing the topic further. While nearly all individuals and clubs responded positively to the idea, as of yet, there has not been a sufficient level of interest for the kind of organized youth-led effort needed to effect change.

Future Work

While the Election Modernization Committee will no longer exist in its current form, the committee identified some questions for future exploration and discussion by interested individuals and groups in town.

1. *What further steps could we take to increase turnout?* Would an alternative timing for local elections bring more voters to the polls, such as holding town elections on a Tuesday? Could we legally and logistically hold elections in November, and would that be a good thing? Is there a way to recruit candidates to run for town-wide office, to increase competitiveness and draw more voters out? Are there innovative ways of engaging young voters in elections? Could we partner more with statewide voting modernization efforts, such as same day voter registration?
2. *What can we do to improve voter education?* What should we do about the fact that many voters report not knowing much about the local candidates or issues? Or are there positions so little understood that we ought not to be voting on them in the first place? What voter education will be necessary if Arlington votes in favor of Ranked Choice Voting?
3. *How do we continue to improve voting accessibility?* Is there an interim solution to the failing AutoMARK machines? What alternative assistive devices could we be offering voters? Is the availability of rides to the polls sufficient?

It is our hope that individuals and other town groups, including the Envision Arlington Civic Engagement Group, continue the mission of election modernization by discussion and debating these topics and others in the future.

Respectfully submitted,

Greg Dennis, Chair	<i>Appointee of the Town Moderator</i>
Adam Badik	<i>Designee of the Democratic Town Committee</i>
Juliana Brazile	<i>Town Clerk</i>
Len Diggins	<i>Designee of the Select Board</i>
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